

Make it Matter

To understand how strong some information is, and how to incorporate it into your own opinions and decisions, we have to go to the source: Who original discovered, measured, said, described this information? We need to go to the primary source.

Reading peer-reviewed original research papers is not easy. Even experts in the exact field of the paper will not understand them completely on the first read. What we expect of you, and know you can do: Do your best to understand the papers you are reading, and notice the parts you don't yet understand.

Try using the process for reading outlined here. It's easier, and you'll learn and retain a lot more than if you started at the top and read sentence-by-sentence.

1. Read the title.

Can you more or less understand it and it seems on target for the question you are trying to answer? Good! If the title is incomprehensible, choose another paper.

2. Read the abstract or summary.

Check that you can repeat back the point of the study and their main result.

3. Read all the subheadings.

Now you know where the authors are going to take you, what kind of story they are telling.

Typical research paper subheadings: Abstract, Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion, References.

4. Look at the figures.

How do they connect with the abstract and the headings? Do they show how the authors reached their conclusions?

5. Read the conclusions.

Check that you can repeat back the main conclusions.

6. Skim all the sections, and then read a second time in more detail.

You won't understand all of it, but make sure you recognize which parts don't yet make sense. Know what you know, and what you don't yet.

